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ABSTRACT

Black women who have gained access to higher education and higher paying positions often find themselves in less than optimal work environments, on account of racist and sexist attitudes of their colleagues. Accordingly, this study was undertaken to identify those aspects of interpersonal interaction and response among black professional women on predominantly white university campuses which relate to optimal satisfaction with work environments. The Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation--Behavior (FIRO-B) and Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) were distributed to 30 black professional women. The following specific interpersonal interaction styles and interpersonal responses were found to be related to higher levels of work satisfaction: (1) caution in approaching colleagues; (2) a social support network outside of the work environment; and (3) high self-confidence, combined with little need for affection from others. References are included. (TE)

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WORK SATISFACTION AND THE BLACK FEMALE PROFESSIONAL: A PILOT STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Specific interpersonal interaction styles and interpersonal responses of black female professionals on predominantly white campuses were found to be related to reported levels of work satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Black women who have gain access to higher education and higher paying positions, often find themselves in less than optimal work environments. The racist and sexist attitudes of colleagues can often result in less than satisfactory work conditions and increased stress in the life of the black female professional. One such source of this stress could be having to interact with others who perceive the black professional female differently than she perceives herself. Steward, Ballard & Martin (1988) found the following: that white colleagues perceived black women as expressing the desire for inclusion and intimacy more so than black women perceived themselves; white colleagues perceived black women as taking on the role of leadership to a lesser extent than black women perceived themselves; and, white colleagues perceived black women as expressing a need for more structure and guidance than black women felt that they were expressing. Such discrepancies could potentially lead to a wide variety of miscommunications and misunderstandings.

Another source of stress could be the tendency for white colleagues to attribute any recognition, honor, or upward mobility of black women to having special status by being black and female (Edwards, 1987; Mosley, 1980). Black women report that white colleagues believe that being black and female is equal to preferential treatment. Competency is seldom given much credence, and if so, it is tertiary. Instead of addressing personal feelings of inadequacy and incompetency in comparison to black female peers, white peers appear to use the chance occurrence of sex and race as an explanation for being less successful or maintaining equal levels of success with the black woman in the work environment.

Even in work environments where there are one or two other individuals of the same racial minority group, interpersonal tensions have been found to increase among the few. Minority members have been found to report experience of feelings of isolation, suspiciousness, tension and stress in relationships among themselves

where there is a proportionately higher ratio of majority group members to minority group members (Cox, 1965; Edwards, 1987; Fleming, 1981; Gibbs, 1973; Westbrook, Miyares, & Roberts, 1978; Wirth, 1951). This stress is most likely exacerbate in professional settings by white colleagues' tendency to make direct comparisons on personal as well as professional bases, thereby increasing this tendency for a rift to develop and/or creating one where there is none. The groundwork for increased feelings of competitiveness among the few is laid.

In spite of these seemingly very painful experiences that black women have reported experiencing at some point during their professional development, many not only learn to survive, but thrive in the profession of choice. The purpose of this study is to identify which aspects of interpersonal interaction and response relate to optimal levels of satisfaction with present work environment of black profession women on predominantly white university campuses.

METHOD

Participants

Thirty, black, doctoral-level, professional women working in predominantly white university settings were sent a questionnaire packet which included a letter of introduction, 1 Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation--Behavior (FIRO-B; Schutz, 1977), 1 Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation--Feelings (FIRO-F; Schutz, 1957), and one Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ; Weiss, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1967).

The FIRO-B is a 54-item questionnaire which measures how examinees interact with others in general. Subscales measure: inclusion (extent to which one moves toward groups of people); control (extent to which one takes on the role of leadership once in a group); and affection (extent to which one develops intimate relationships with others). Each subscale results in two scores indicating the extent of manifest

behavior (expressed) and wanted behavior from others (wanted). Scores range from 0 to 9: 0-1 are considered extremely low scores; 2-3 are considered low scores; 4-5 are considered medium scores; 6-7 are considered high scores; and 8-9 are considered extremely high scores. Estimation of reliability, as measured by a reproducibility score, is .94 for all six scales. The mean coefficient of stability (test-retest) for the FIRO-B over the six scales if .86.

The FIRO-F is a 54-item questionnaire which measures the typical ways examinees feel about people in general. Subscales measure: significance (extent to which examinees feel others are significant and want to be perceived as significant to others); competence (extent to which examinees feel others are competent or reliable and want others to perceive them as such); and lovability (extent to which examinees feel others are lovable and want others to perceive them as such). Scores range from 0-9 and are categorized similarly as with the FIRO-B. Reliability and validity similar to that of FIRO-B.

The MSQ (short form) is a measure of one of the primary indicators of work adjustment. The long-form consists of 100 items. Each item refers to a reinforcer in the work environment. Respondents indicate how satisfied s/he is with present position. Five response alternatives are presented for each item: "very dissatisfied; dissatisfied, neither; satisfied; and very satisfied." Reliability coefficients range from .87 to .92. Test-retest correlation coefficients range from .70-.89. Evidence for validity of the MSQ is derived mainly from its performing according to theoretical expectations. (construct validity)

RESULTS

Of the 30 packets distributed, 15 were returned. Six major universities were represented in the sample. Years spent in present position ranged from 1-15 years. Ages ranged from 30-48.

Results indicated that participants who scored highest on the MSQ (job satisfaction) were black women who:

a. obtained medium scores on expressed inclusion on the FIRO-B;
b. obtained extremely low scores on wanted inclusion on the FIRO-B;
c. obtained extremely high scores on expressed control on the FIRO-B;
d. obtained extremely low scores on wanted control on the FIRO-B;
e. obtained extremely low scores on expressed affection on the FIRO-B;
f. obtained extremely low scores on wanted affection on the FIRO-B;
g. obtained high scores on feelings of significance toward others on the FIRO-F;
h. obtained low scores on wanted feelings of significance from others on the FIRO-F;
i. obtained extremely low scores on feelings of others' competence on the FIRO-F;
j. obtained extremely high scores on wanted feelings of competence from others on the FIRO-F;
h. obtained high scores on feelings of lovability toward others on the FIRP-F;
i. obtained low scores on wanted feelings of lovability from others on the FIRO-F.

DISCUSSION

Given that the MSQ is a measure of adjustment to the work environment, results would seem to indicate the interpersonal style black professional women have adopted in order to best adjust to the predominantly white work environment. This manner of responding could be said to assist in black women's ability to survive and thrive in an environment that is less than accepting and demeaning much of the time. Closer examination of what these results indicate would prove important primarily as a guide for other black women who may find themselves in such an

environment, however, it will also give a clearer understanding of the office dynamics from which black women must protect themselves.

First, black women who tended to move toward groups with some degree of caution and who wanted and expected very little in return from colleagues were those who reported highest job satisfaction (medium expressed inclusion scores on the FIRO-B). As a survival skill, this would seem to indicate that the downfall for many black women would be to enter the work environment expecting and needing to be included as a member of the office network. Proceeding to become involved with colleagues, whether black or white, without some caution or discrimination might lead to emotional stress or disappointment that eventually could negatively influence work productivity. Black women seemingly must become adept in ascertaining who to trust and when. It would also seem that she would have to develop an adequate, satisfactory social support network outside of the work environment (medium expressed inclusion and extremely low wanted inclusion). Ignoring the impact of her blackness upon colleagues may be quite painful regardless of what credentials she might initially present.

The balancing act seems to become a bit complicated as the ideal interpersonal style unfolds. Although the black woman is to approach colleagues with caution, it seems that the most satisfied professional must accept most individuals as significant and as important and worthy of attention (high feelings of significance for others). It would seem important that black women perceive most individuals as learning opportunities. Results indicate that the most satisfied professionals want others to perceive them as significant, but not to the same extent that it is felt toward those around them (medium wanted significance).

Findings also indicated that the most satisfied black professional woman comfortably moves toward leadership roles when in groups, and relies on guidance from only a few select individuals (extremely high expressed control and extremely

low wanted control). The most satisfied black professional women expressed feeling little trust toward others in terms of ability, judgment, confidence or for support (extremely low competency scores on FIRO-F). In contrast, the confidence others have in her ability is considered to be extremely important (extremely high competency scores on the FIRO-F). These results seem to indicate that the black professional woman most satisfied with her career is also willing to do the things necessary that her profession of choice and colleagues around her deem worthy of admiration.

Developing intimate relationships with colleagues does not seem to be a pat of the most satisfied black professional female's life. Those women who expressed and wanted the least amount to affection from others (extremely low expressed and wanted scores on the FIRO-B) were found to express the most satisfaction with their current positions. This relationship also held true for the feelings of lovability and wanted lovability from others. The women who felt warm toward only a few individuals were the most satisfied. How well she is liked did not seem to be important to the most satisfied black professional woman. Given the other scores, the emphasis of importance for aspiring black professional women should be how well her work, in areas of creativity, productivity and quality, is respected by those around her.

It seems safe to conclude that black women expecting feelings of warmth, inclusion, guidance, and support from others within the work environment would also tend to express lower levels of job satisfaction. However, what might prove most difficult for many black women is maintaining low expectations from colleagues in the predominantly white work environment, and continuing behavioral interaction that indicates warmth, sensitivity, and caring. The black woman seemingly must move toward and find something to value in others that may or may not have her best interest in mind. In order to maintain some level of optimal functioning and satisfaction in the work environment, the professional black woman must give and

expect nothing in return. It would seem imperative that the black professional woman have a fully functioning support network outside of the work setting that would allow such to be feasible. Even in the presence of such a social support network, the additional stress of existing in an environment that offers little positive validation and understanding would seem difficult. This would be particularly true when the black woman must win the respect of colleagues by engaging in new tasks without the guidance and support from senior colleagues in the work environment. In these instances, outside support may be of no benefit in assisting the young black women in maintaining optimal functioning in the predominantly white work environment.

Results should prove useful not only to mental health professionals who may at some time provide service to black professional women, but black women who are currently in the work force as well as those in training. In spite of the overall usefulness to these particular groups, many questions remain unanswered: Is the interpersonal style described above one that all professional women must adopt in a highly competitive environment, regardless of racial minority status or is it unique to black women? Is this interpersonal style one that all professionals, both men and women, must adopt in any work environment? Does the work environment impact each of these groups similarly, but to varying degrees? Given the small sample size of this study and these critical questions, further research in the area of job satisfaction and interpersonal style for professional women would appear to be essential. For if this interpersonal style is demanded of any group member in order to attain optimal levels of job satisfaction, it would seem imperative that we begin to more clearly identify for whom this is true and to begin to make systematic changes that will not demand any of its members to adjust in such an unhealthy manner.

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